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Home rule for Ireland

London

1911

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HOME RULE

FOR

IRELAND.

A SPEECH

DELIVERED BY

THE RIGHT HON.

AUGUSTINE BIRRELL, M.P.

(SECRETARY FOR IRELAND),

AT

ILFRACOMBE,

On OCTOBER 19th, 1911.

PUBLISHED BY

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—
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HOME RULE FOR IRELAND.

Mr. BIRRELL, *speaking at Ilfracombe on October 19th, 1911, said*: When I last visited Ilfracombe, when the division was represented by Mr. Billson, and when I myself was a private member of Parliament, I was then a good deal of a free lance, somewhat of an independent member, and I sat, when I could find a seat, on the back benches. I am willing to admit that at that time, at all events, I was not particularly struck with either the native superiority or the intellectual stature of the men who occupied both front benches and also a good deal of the time of the House. I remember on one occasion, when happening to catch the Speaker's eye, I gave those well-placed gentry a piece of my mind. I am glad to think that speech is entirely forgotten, and its mutilated remains buried for ever in the dulllest series of books ever printed—"Hansard's Parliamentary Debates." Therefore I pass over that part of the history of my life. This evening I come here as a Minister of the Crown, with a Department to look after as best I can. Although there are, I know, a great many people who question the ability of the Minister, there are none who deny the existence of the Department. The Department with which I am concerned is Ireland.

Ireland's Strange History.

Ireland has a name which falls unpleasantly on English ears. It excites painful memories, and recalls a strange history. I am a great reader, no longer of books but of catalogues of books, and I notice that certain friends of mine, very old correspondents and my oldest creditors in the world, the second-hand booksellers, are beginning in their catalogues, which they send to me almost every day, to advertise for sale that portion of their wares which deal with Ireland. Their catalogues are full of Irish histories and biographies, speeches, trials for high treason, pamphlets, poems, novels, plays, mostly, no doubt, written in English, but a certain number of them written in French and in Italian and in German, because for many a long year the critical eye of the foreigner has been cast upon our one great failure. They are shrewd men, these booksellers, and I suppose, from the activity they are displaying in this direction, they are anticipating that something is shortly going to happen which will attract once more the attention of what is called the reading public across the Irish Channel. I don't propose

to dwell to-night upon the history of Ireland. There is no time to do it, and I admit that a politician's history is always justifiably suspect. People are a little suspicious of it. They are apt to imagine that he omits such chapters as do not suit his purpose.

Tenacity of Life and Faith.

I pass over it with this remark: that after much study of it for many years, and extending over many volumes, the main feeling in my mind is one of amazement that after all the fightings and rebellions, confiscations and massacres, after all the penal laws and famines, tithe wars and Coercion Acts, after the destruction of native industries, and the yearly drain on the population by emigration—that after all this, there should still be in Ireland four and a half millions of people, and that they should still be adherents, the great majority of them, of their old religion. Such tenacity of life and faith I honestly believe to be almost unexampled in the history of the whole world. Most of us are Protestants. There is no better Protestant in this country than myself. But we have to be forever allies with a country which, as I have already explained to you, through terrible days and the most harsh treatment, still by an overwhelming majority adheres to its old religion. And I do not know that I am prepared to think any the worse of them on that account. Let us be fair in this matter. From the time of Queen Elizabeth almost down to the time of Queen Victoria, to be a Roman Catholic in Ireland was to be an outcast. No doubt at times they retaliated upon their oppressors, and one horrible massacre was committed. They were robbed of their land. They were given their choice between hell and Connaught. They were ousted from a portion of Ulster in favour of Scotsmen, and they were killed or banished whenever opportunity offered. But they were neither annihilated nor converted, and yet almost from the time of Queen Elizabeth down to this day they enjoyed all the blessings of a Protestant Establishment. They had four Archbishops, later on cruelly reduced to two, between twenty and thirty Bishops, and I don't know how many Deans and parochial clergy, all supported by tithes, wrung out of wretched tenants, none of whom ever entered the places of worship to which they were compelled to contribute.

What the Irish Question is.

The Irish question has not passed into ancient history. We have all lived under the shadow of it for the greater part of our political lives. When I first stood for the division of Liverpool now represented by Mr. Smith, in 1885, Home Rule was at the back of our heads. In 1886 it came to the front, and from that time forward, down to the present time, the Irish question has dominated—and if you like to say it, has domineered—over the whole field of Imperial politics. It has reverberated throughout two hemispheres. And what is this Irish question? What is it? It is, how best to govern four and a-half millions of people—less

than the population of London—inhabiting an island of their own under conditions wholly unlike our own. There is the whole question, and it ought not to be a difficult one for an Imperial race. But I suppose it must be, for it once split the Liberal party and it has ever destroyed the Tory party. We have not heard of that party since. It is now the Unionist party; a coalition, that terrible thing a coalition party which hopes at the present moment, some day or other, to have the chance of giving this country Tariff Reform. (*Cries of "Never!"*) But it hopes to do so. And the reason of this hope is the supposed aversion of the English electorate to conceding Home Rule to Ireland. If you do not concede Home Rule to Ireland to-day the Liberal party must go, and in comes the Unionist party and Tariff Reform. The question is how best to govern this island. Difficult or easy, and I think it ought to be easy, though in the past I admit it has been found difficult—but be the question difficult or easy, we are pledged to face it, and do our very utmost next year to satisfy the demand constitutionally made on the floor of the House of Commons by the representatives of an overwhelming majority of the Irish people in Ireland, in England, in Scotland, throughout the Empire and the world. That is what we are facing, that is what we mean to face, and with your assistance to accomplish.

Mr. Long Wants to Know.

Mr. Walter Long, who was Chief Secretary for Ireland, speaking the other day, was kind enough to observe that I was going to speak here at Ilfracombe, and that he takes an interest in my speeches, which flatters me very much. What he says to me is: "It is your plain duty, speaking at Ilfracombe, to expound the contents of the Bill you are going to introduce next session." Very well. He says—and he has been Chief Secretary for Ireland—he does not know what Home Rule really means, or what we mean by Home Rule. I won't indulge in a *tu quoque*, or "You're another." I won't ask him what Mr. Balfour means by Tariff Reform, because what is the good of asking a man a question he cannot answer?

The Government's Home Rule Scheme.

But I quite agree with Mr. Long. I think both he and the electors of this country should know what we mean by Home Rule. I will tell you. Our scheme absolutely involves the setting up in Ireland of a Parliament, consisting of two Chambers with an executive, that is, a Cabinet of Ministers, responsible to it; it involves that this Irish Parliament should have full legislative powers and control over purely Irish concerns; and in considering what those concerns are, we shall be found taking a wide view, our object being to admit a national demand for national responsibility, and to establish yet another Parliament—for there are already a great number—another Parliament in the Empire, subordinate to the Imperial Parliament, which will have an opportunity, I hope and

pray, and believe, in time to come, of becoming a school, a training school, for Irish statesmen and for Irish administrators. That is my answer to Mr. Long.

"Wait until next March."

I know what he will say in reply to it. He will say, "I want to know all about those financial difficulties of yours and the Parliamentary problem." My answer is: I will gladly tell Mr. Long what we propose to do in those matters, and I will take him into my counsel regarding them. I will say to Mr. Long, "If you will give me your promise that if I can succeed in removing or modifying any objections you may have to our financial or Parliamentary proposals, if I am fortunate enough to carry you with me, at all events to some great extent, you will then promise me to forego and withdraw your opposition to my main proposal which is the essence of Home Rule, namely, to concede to them an Irish Parliament and Executive responsible to it. Will you accept on those terms?" But Mr. Long can only give one answer, being the honest man that he is. He is obliged to tell me that he is bound by oath to oppose Home Rule in every shape and form, and nothing I say to him, no concessions I make to him, however great on financial or Parliamentary problems or anything else, will remove by one jot or one tittle his ferocious opposition to the whole scheme. It is no use taking men of that sort into your confidence, and my answer to Mr. Long therefore is, "Wait until next March." If a man does not mean to put his horse at the first fence, why trouble him about the second? We shall have plenty of time, extending over long months, next year and the year after, to discuss Home Rule in principle and detail. There are a great many itching pens that will write innumerable leading articles upon the subject, and there are a great many tongues, some, I am afraid, capable of distilling a great deal of venom, which will discuss every detail of our measure.

The Parliament Act and Home Rule.

The Parliament Bill has become law, not a day too soon. But, still, what are the provisions of that Act of Parliament? Our opponents do not seem to have read the Bill until it became law. They are beginning to discover and to deal in all their speeches with the fact that it is an exceedingly moderate measure. I pointed out that, whilst destroying completely the absolute Veto of the House of Lords, it undoubtedly increased to some extent the powers of delay hitherto constitutionally enjoyed by that assembly. Years have to go by before the will of the people, represented by a measure which has passed the House of Commons on three occasions can become the law of the land. Unionist speakers are now saying that, under the operation of the Parliament Act, Home Rule will have to be discussed a good many times and for a long time before it will become law, and many opportunities will be given for the purposes of ascertaining how far it finds favour with the people. That's what I said long ago. They, the Unionists, say it now without any acknowledgment.

The Colonies and Home Rule.

We shall go into this great contest—for a great contest it is, and a long time it will occupy—well supported and well equipped. We have the great and growing weight of opinion behind us in every quarter of the country, and if you choose to do what Unionists are always bidding us do, if you ask us to consult the Colonies on the subject, the opinion on our side is absolutely overwhelming. Colonial Cabinets may come and go, people in the Colonies may be appealed to on this subject, or on that, and may return discordant verdicts. But on this question of giving Ireland self-government they are as one man.

No Lessening of the Irish Demand.

There is a false and cowardly pretence, which has just been started in the English papers, that the demand for self-government in Ireland is dying out, and that the Union, after 111 years, has suddenly become one of the most popular things in Ireland. In fact, they say Home Rule has been killed by alternate kicks and kisses. The kicks are the Coercion Acts passed since the Union, and the kisses are repeated doles of public money. I believe that to be as complete a delusion as ever was printed. It can easily be combated. If this attempt of ours, honest and determined attempt as it is, to carry Home Rule fails, our successors will soon discover whether Ireland is content to remain where she is, to haul down her national flag, and to give up what she, at all events, believes to be her birthright. The demand is great, is strong, and, save in a certain corner of Ulster, is well-nigh universal.

Leaving Sentiment and Nationality Aside.

But I am not going to address you as if you were an audience of Irishmen. I am not going to appeal to you by the ashes of your forefathers, or by your religious associations, or even by your passionate love for your native land, though I do not see why I should not ask you to sympathise with the people who entertain those strong feelings. I do ask you to sympathise with them, and I ask you to believe that all wise politicians and people take this strong feeling into consideration. But, in addressing you, I am well content to leave sentiment and nationality out of consideration, and to say that, even if we agreed with Lord Hugh Cecil that there is no such thing as an Irishman at all—and Ireland, in his judgment, is no more than a county of England, separated by the sea, and chiefly inhabited by Roman Catholics; even were we to take that view, we should still be forced by the inexorable logic of facts to admit that an absentee Parliament is totally unable to do justice to Ireland, or to assist in her development, or to effect or accomplish her regeneration.

Home Rule a Business Matter.

I have in my boxes more than thirty-five reports of Royal and Vice-Regal Commissions upon Irish affairs since 1880. Out of those

thirty-five reports, in twenty-five cases nothing has been done, because there has been no time to deal with them. The Local Government Board of Ireland, of which I am President, has had, during the same number of years, considerably over one hundred applications from local bodies and public authorities recommending matters of business and legislative reform, relating to matters of business alone—no politics, no Home Rule, but matters relating to local concerns. Not a tithe of them has been dealt with. I repeat that this is a business matter. For example, everybody who knows anything about Ireland, knows that one of the things most calling for reform is the condition of its small towns. They are miserable and poverty-stricken in many cases, and the reason is that their boundaries are far too restricted, their rating area being too small to enable them to make arrangements for the decent prosperity of their inhabitants. In 1878 a Commission was appointed to inquire into that matter. Those Commissioners visited one hundred and twelve towns, took evidence in each, and after laborious investigations, they made a report recommending that in all those towns, five only excepted, the boundary should be extended on certain principles indicated in the report. With the smallest exceptions, nothing has been done with regard to that report, though published more than forty years ago. Now, that is what I mean when I say that, Sentiment apart, Business, and Business no less than Sentiment, the spirit of Mr. Gradgrind as much as the spirit of Henry Grattan, make it necessary, if bare justice is to be done to Ireland, that they should have a Parliament on the spot, ready and able to deal with their own business, able to deal with these huge arrears, on Irish lines.

How Ireland Fares at Present.

I know nothing in the whole range of human affairs more idiotic than the senseless way in which Ireland is dragged in the wake of England. She gets whatever England gets, whether she wants it or not, but she rarely gets what she does want if England does not want it. And when occasionally she does get what she wants, it is only after an exhibition of illegality, crime, and lawlessness, and then the British Parliament turns to Irishmen with a groan, and says she must have something of what she wants, and she generally gets half of what she does want, intermixed with a stroud dose of what she doesn't want. I say, without hesitation, in the government of Irishmen, extravagance and meanness go hand in hand. A Minister of the Crown is employed doing nothing else except to act as a go-between between Dublin Castle and the Treasury: he is a perpetual mendicant, trying to get out of the common purse as much as he can for the wants of a country whose true interests the Imperial Parliament have neither the time nor the disposition nor the knowledge to discuss.

The Nationalist Members and Irish Administration and Legislation.

There is another thing I should like to call your attention to. For thirty years, perhaps ever since the Union, all the Irish Nation-

alists representing the towns and counties of Ireland, concerned with the local business of their places, have been cut off from taking part in the administration of their country's affairs. They will not sit on either Front Bench, they deny themselves all the sweets of office—that is the salaries—there are no other sweets—they deny themselves the sweets of office and the pride of power. Administratively, that is a great loss to Ireland, that you cannot employ the men who know most about it and who are the representatives of the people. Although, administratively, it has been an enormous loss to Ireland to be deprived of the services of these Irishmen, from a legislative point of view it is marvellous what, in a hostile, ignorant, and indifferent House of Commons, the Irish party has been able to effect by their self-sacrifice and by their self-denying ordinance. Unionist and Liberal Administrations are fond of plumping themselves upon the important Irish remedial measures they have passed: but everybody behind the scenes knows perfectly well that none of these measures would ever have seen the light, but for the constant pressure of the Irish party. Knowing what I do of the contents of these remedial measures, I don't hesitate to say that, good as they mostly were, they would have been better if the voice of the Irish members had been more listened to, and clauses shaped more in accordance with Irish wishes than they actually were. The time has come when common-sense should rule in this matter of the concession of self-government to Ireland.

The Money and the Religious Arguments Against Home Rule.

In Ireland at the present day, amongst the opponents of Home Rule, two great difficulties are being talked about: they are, money and religion. It is a very odd thing about money and religion, but I have noticed—I don't know whether you ever had—that, whilst the people who get most excited about money are the people who have most of it; those who get most excited about religion are the people who have none of it. Religion is based on love, not on hatred. It consists, not in the many things you dislike, but in the few things you believe and love.

Sir Edward Carson and the Money Argument.

The money argument against Home Rule is one that apparently most recommends itself to Sir Edward Carson. Sir Edward Carson has nothing of the religious bigot in his constitution. I remember, and am very grateful for, the warm and useful support he gave me when the University Bill was before the House. I also remember how he supported the Royal Declaration Bill. And I also remember the black looks he earned from his friends in Ulster whilst he was thus honourably occupied. Positively, they would not let him come to Belfast to make a speech. They must have thrown things at him if he had come. He is a funny leader for an Orange rebellion. His point of view is the money point of view. That is the thing

that makes him for the Union. "England," he says, "is one of the richest countries in the world. Ireland is one of the poorest." England, he admits, knows very little about Ireland; but, still, whatever England gives herself, she has for very shame to give to us. I am now speaking in the name of Sir Edward Carson when I say of Ireland that we are living by tips. We are poor relations; but we have a wealthy, though irascible, old uncle, who alternately boxes our ears and puts a sovereign in our pocket. For the sake of the tips, we will hang on. And then, look at all the things we get in exchange. We have a splendid police force in Ireland, costing a little matter of a million and a quarter pounds *per annum*. We have a well-manned Bench, with a Lord Chancellor, who costs more than the whole judiciary of Denmark. We have a glorious army of civil servants, all comfortably salaried. We have old age pensions costing two and a half millions per annum. And the cost of civil government in Ireland is—well, listen to these figures: In England the cost per man is 18s. 9d.; in Scotland, £1 2s. 8d.; in Ireland, £2 4s. 1d. Sir Edward Carson becomes almost lyrical in his joy over these figures. "We cost more than we pay," he says. "We get an Army and Navy thrown in," for nothing. "We are not allowed to administer our own affairs; beggars must not be choosers." And so, he asks, "Why should I sing 'The Wearing of the Green,' when I am prepared always to drink the health of John Bull, the nunky who pays for everything?"

"In no Niggardly Spirit."

I ask you to look at the question from the English point of view. If it be a fact that Ireland to-day costs so much more than she contributes, what, I wonder, will be the estate of the account thirty years hence? England's rate of social expenditure is increasing year by year, and everything we give to England we have to give a corresponding portion to the Irish people. If the deficit is one million and a half now, then in thirty years' time it will be millions upon millions. As for economy, great economies can be effected in Ireland on the police, judiciary, and other things. But who is going to economise? Pensioners do not save. Nephews are not thinking of their uncle's pockets. The more they spend the better they are pleased. If Home Rule is definitely declined and refused, the expenditure will enormously increase. The time has come to cast the account, to repair past injustice. If Home Rule is right, as we believe it to be, if it is the true way out of the difficulty—and in solemn truth it is the only way—why, we must face this monetary difficulty boldly, and in no niggardly spirit. The worst thing that can happen to England financially is to allow things to go on on the present basis.

The Religious Difficulty.

I now come to the religious difficulty. I do not deny its existence, although I doubt its right to be called religious. There is one odd thing about it, that the people in Ireland who feel the

religious difficulty most strongly are the very people who if Ireland became Protestant to-morrow would all be enthusiastic Home Rulers. The Presbyterians in the North used to be in the old days—and many are still—strong Home Rulers. The difficulty with some of them is that they are afraid that what is left of Protestant ascendancy will be destroyed. The Captain Craigs in those days were all patriots and against the Union, but now the old Protestant ascendancy has disappeared. By virtue of democratic laws it is gone, but the spirit of it still remains, and I do not deny its strength. Four-fifths of the people are of one way of religious thinking, and the other one-fifth are divided between Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists, and for long centuries that portion of the one-fifth which was Episcopalian sat on the heads of all the rest of the population. They liked it—but the four-fifths did not like it. They resisted, rebelled against it, and democracy has at last settled the matter by refusing to attach political disqualifications to religious belief; and now the four-fifths are politically on terms of perfect equality with the one-fifth. They all have the franchise together. That is the religious difficulty; the spirit of Protestant ascendancy, which desires to keep all the best things for themselves, and to leave only the less good things for the majority.

The Truce Between Money and Religion.

For the moment money and religion have shaken hands. The money argument of Sir Edward Carson is prevailing over the religious argument of Captain Craig, and the money men are saying to the religious men, "For God's sake keep a civil tongue in your head about the Pope and the Papist, because if you go on cursing them we shall lose the votes of the Roman Catholics in England, many of whom are Tories and strong Unionists." This truce must break down, because nothing but the spirit of Protestant ascendancy has prevented Home Rule being passed a long time ago.

"We Will Not Look Back."

I feel well persuaded that the time has come to go forward with courage on this great business. We have put our hands to the plough; we will not look back. Never in the history of the world has the experiment of self-government failed. Why should it fail in the case of Ireland? Ireland, instead of being a blot on our escutcheon, will in time become a real integral portion of a truly United Kingdom.

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